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ABSTRACT

Building a rural community-school development project where students engage in community-based learning experiences requires changes in the way schools prepare rural youth for the future. This publication examines the kinds of changes a school system must make before planning and implementing community-based learning strategies. Changes in perspective and changes in policy and practice are needed, with changes in perspective the hardest to achieve. Changes in perspective include: expanding ideas about the school's function in the community; rethinking the nature of teaching and learning; changing ideas about students' capabilities; and believing that change can happen. Changes in policy and practice encompass curriculum planning and instruction, assuring academic credit for community-based learning activities, facilitating student access to the community and community access to the school, transportation issues, scheduling issues, and legal considerations. A brief look at school-community initiatives in Balmorhea (Texas), Marshall (Arkansas), and Mora (New Mexico) suggests that two critical factors in the success of these initiatives are a belief in each individual's capacity to make a difference, and good antennae for detecting opportunity. (SV)

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Benefits 2

School Development
Community Development
Economic Development
Youth Development

THE EXPONENTIAL RESULTS OF LINKING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

Issue Number Four

Welcome to Benefits 2

***Benefits*[2] is a series of papers addressing ways that rural schools and communities can work together so that both will thrive. The previous three issues described two broad types of projects that address both curricular and community goals: service learning, which combines community service with structured opportunities to apply academic learning; and entrepreneurial education, which provides the community with needed products and resources while teaching students academic and work-related skills. This issue focuses in greater depth on the kinds of changes and commitments needed from school systems if these types of projects are to succeed.**

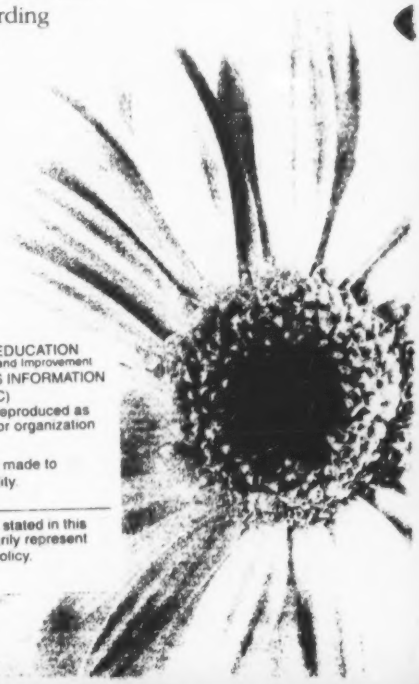
Adapting to community-based learning

"Schools as institutions are slow to change. So are small, rural communities." (Miller, 1993, p. 94)

"The future of rural communities is not foreordained." (Flora & Flora, 1990, p. 197)

What do these two quotations have to do with one another? From SEDL's perspective as an agency concerned with helping rural schools to survive in an increasingly urban world, these sentences suggest both the challenge and the imperative for grounding rural education within the context of the community.

The statistics on school closings and consolidation, the descriptions of rural communities struggling to survive when nearby factories move to the Pacific Rim, data regarding the nation's population shift from countryside to city —all these are familiar, and discouraging. Yet some rural communities and their schools are finding ways to survive.



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Adapting to community-based learning
continued

The strategies they use are as varied as the surrounding landscapes. But what these rural places have in common is a willingness to change: a spirit that encourages risk-taking, openness to new ideas, and—above all—a commitment to breaking through the rigid compartmentalization within which the old industrial model of progress has confined us.

It needs to be kept in mind that the changes implied in building a community-school development project where students engage in community-based learning experiences are essentially questions about changing the way schools go about preparing rural youth for the future. (p. 7)

This issue of *Benefits²* focuses on the kinds of changes that may be demanded of your school system as you begin to plan and implement community-based learning strategies. The discussion is organized into two major categories: changes in perspective, and changes in policy and practice. Changes in perspective are perhaps the hardest to achieve, and often must precede more practical ones.

Students learn academic, work, and citizenship skills in real-world settings; for example, by helping to staff the community library or community health clinic.

Entrepreurial mentorships are examples of non-traditional school-community partnerships.

As previous issues of this publication have described, a principal strategy for survival involves joint efforts that engage students in helping to develop community resources. *Service learning* and *entrepreneurial education* place student learning in a community context. Students learn academic, work, and citizenship skills in real-world settings, for example, by helping to staff community health clinics or by operating a local newspaper, retail shop, or construction business.

These kinds of activities offer tremendous benefits to students, school, and community alike. But they require substantial changes from the usual ways in which schools function. As Bruce Miller (1995) cautions:

Changes in perspective

Expanding ideas about the school's function in the community. A first requirement is to reconsider the role of the school within a rural community. The "factory" model of institutional operation—a model that has dominated business, government, and education for most of this century—has encouraged a rigid separation of functions. Schools, once the heart of many small towns, have largely disengaged themselves from a broader role as community and social center. Bruce Miller reports that, in reviewing some 250 articles and reports on rural community development, "I was struck by the conspicuous absence of schools as collaborative partners in their communities" (p. 96). To support community-based education, it's necessary to reclaim the school's role as an integral part of the entire community's existence.

Rethinking the nature of teaching and learning. It's also necessary to expand one's ideas about the purpose and nature of schooling itself.

Yet another needed change, for many educators and community members alike, is a shift in perspective about what can be expected from students. Older students can be important members of collaborative action groups like the CAT in Fabens, TX.

Miller and Hahn (1997) observe that school-community partnerships and community-based learning "are not generally viewed as traditional elements of schooling" (p. 71).

Community-based education, as we have described it, presumes that schools have an important role in helping students to become effective community members. From this perspective, the goal of education is not merely to convey a body of knowledge within specific subject areas; it is also to help students to become "creative, productive, critical citizens" (Foxfire Fund, 1998, p. 5).

Ideas about the appropriate methods of teaching need to change as well. Traditionally, education is classroom- and textbook-bound; a student's measure of success is a test score. Community-based instruction, though it matches the characteristics of what we know about the most effective ways of teaching, is messier and more complicated than this traditional model. Subject matter isn't easily segregated, the learning environment isn't rigidly controlled, and knowledge develops as much from student dialogue and problem-solving as it does from teacher or text. Is it schooling when one student tutors another? Or when students collect samples from local streams and wells to monitor water quality? Or when students help to remodel the kitchen of an elderly resident? The answer is a resounding *yes*—and not just in terms of citizenship and work skills. With careful planning and reinforcement, students will learn academic subject matter as well, and most teachers find the task of engaging their classes in subject matter learning to be much easier when students see an immediate use for their academic knowledge.

Changing ideas about students' capabilities. Yet another needed change, for many educators and community members alike, is a shift in perspective about what can be expected from students. Many of us have become jaded in our attitudes about "kids today"; we think of them, as a group, as pleasure-oriented, lazy, careless, irresponsible. Can students make useful choices in helping to direct their own learning? Can they be helpful, attentive members of a collaborative group? Can they handle the responsibility of working in the community, of managing complex projects where others depend on them? Again, experience shows that they can—with appropriate support and supervision of course. In fact, most students seem hungry for these kinds of activities, once they see a connection to their own lives and interests.

Believing that change can happen. Perhaps the greatest challenge is overcoming the feeling that, though exciting ideas might be taking hold in other places, nothing can ever change in your environment. Perhaps it's the school board, or a community harshly divided by class or ethnicity, or an administrator who hires only family members, or parents who wouldn't hear of taking their kids away from their textbooks. Whatever the list, you can be sure there have been similar problems in other places—that, nevertheless, have found ways to make change happen.

There are factors that can help you to overcome the "can't do" mentality. It helps to have a sense of urgency. The threat of consolidation, for example, or the sudden shutdown of a factory that provided most of the community's jobs, sometimes motivates people to try ideas they'd never otherwise consider. But even without such immediate harbingers of doom, it's possible to break through entrenched patterns and beliefs. The most basic guideline is to start small (though not so small that your activities seem inconsequential). Work slowly but systematically to build confidence, energy, and enthusiasm.

Another strategy is to show folks what's worked elsewhere. Identify schools and communities much like your own that have developed innovative solutions (agencies like SEDL can help you to find them), and take a small group of key people to see for themselves. And finally, use a developmental process that offers tools for bringing diverse constituencies together and working constructively. SEDL and others have identified step-by-step procedures that can help groups work collaboratively to plan and implement ambitious projects, with supporting tools and techniques for everything from identifying needs to handling conflicts (see sidebar). By adopting such an approach, you can help your community to step out of the usual ruts and routines.

Changes in policy and practice

Changes in curriculum planning and instruction. For community-based learning to be successful, it must be integrated into the ongoing curriculum. This may require shifting some of your current instructional methods and content to more interdisciplinary and team-teaching approaches. At a minimum, it demands careful planning to specify academic learning objectives, lesson plans, and criteria for assessment. In describing a rural school tutoring program for which students receive academic credit, for example, Miller and Hahn observe that:

> Clearly defined guidelines and expectations for participants have contributed to the program's success. A contract signed by the student, teacher, and principal specifies credit requirements, student responsibilities, attendance, and consequences for failing to live up to agreed-upon expectations. (p. 27)

Assuring academic credit. Some community-based learning activities can be incorporated into existing courses with relative ease. Others will require special arrangements. For the tutoring program described above, for example, students substitute tutoring activities for study hall three days each week; in return, they receive a quarter-semester of credit. In another school, students from several grade levels, under the supervision of the home economics teacher, established and helped to operate a day-care center, again using special credit arrangements. In some cases, schools have not yet found ways to incorporate community-based projects into the academic program, and so operate them as extracurricular activities. However, this approach, while better than nothing, has not proved as strong in terms of student motivation and learning.

Access to campus and community. If the community is going to be involved with the school, and vice-versa, school policies and practices may need to be adapted to make it possible for students to leave campus, and for community members to visit the school, and to feel welcome when they do so. Some schools may need to modify closed-campus policies.

With security a growing concern on school campuses, many schools have taken steps to limit outside access. While safety must be an overriding consideration, security policies in many cases also have served to intimidate parents and community members, discouraging them from visiting the school. Certainly you don't want to compromise security in any way. But, with planning, it's possible to maintain a safe environment and to make the school environment more welcoming. Simple steps, such as communicating with parents about security measures and the reasons for them, or posting signs as to where to enter the school building, can make a big difference. You might establish a volunteer desk where a parent or community volunteer serves as greeter, guiding visitors to the office to sign in. Security guards, if you have them, can be oriented to friendliness and courtesy as well as vigilance.

Transportation. Access issues also include concerns about transportation, primarily for students to get to community sites, but also for parents and community to get to the school. In one SEDL-sponsored site, the roads leading to the school regularly washed out during heavy rains, making it difficult to get to the school. The site's school-community collaborative is working with local officials to secure road improvements that will improve access to the school campus. In some cases, parents or community representatives may lack transportation; again, a volunteer network can help in arranging rides and carpools for collaborative meetings and school-community events.

Scheduling. For some projects, class schedules may need to be adapted to support service learning or entrepreneurial activities. Miller and Hahn, in their look at several community-based programs, note that "the 50-minute period, which divides up the school day, posed difficulties for projects that needed sustained periods of time" (p. 26). It's difficult, for example, to build a house in 50-minute increments, or to operate a thriving photocopy business for only one hour a day. By using team teaching and interdisciplinary approaches, it's possible to block out larger periods during the school day; other flexible scheduling arrangements are also possible.

Scheduling is sometimes a concern in terms of the school year as well as the school *day*. Some projects may need to continue through the summer. A school-based health clinic staffed in part by students, for example, is of limited benefit to the community if it shuts down for three months out of the year.

Finding a formula for success

Several communities in the SEDL region boast health care clinics that successfully link schools and their communities.

What does it take for a school system to succeed in linking curricular and community goals? A look at the sites profiled in previous issues of *Benefits*[2] — Balmorhea, Texas, Marshall, Arkansas, and Mora, New Mexico — suggests two critical factors: a belief in each individual's capacity to make a difference, and good antennae for detecting opportunity.

The west Texas town of Balmorhea boasts a school-based community health clinic, a weather station that provides data to area farmers and ranchers, and several other developing service learning initiatives. According to assistant principal Michael Barrandey, change in Balmorhea began five years ago with a service learning workshop he attended at the suggestion of his superintendent. The workshop in turn led to a $5,000 grant, which the district used in part to purchase supplies for the local EMS service and to plant trees and flowers in a deteriorating downtown park. These modest activities sparked a sense of possibility—and *responsibility*—that grows stronger each year. Today school, city, and county government work together on community improvement efforts. The county, for example, has built parking lots and a new running track for the school. The school, for its part, allows community members to use the district's sports and other facilities. A small but telling indicator of success: The school tennis courts have lights for night-time games; the last player who leaves is responsible for turning off the lights—and nobody forgets or ignores the task. In Balmorhea, Barrandey explains, "when people say 'somebody needs to do something,' somebody does something."

In both Marshall, Arkansas, and Mora, New Mexico, school-community initiatives have been strongly supported by outside resources, from a county literacy council to a federally funded enterprise community. Marshall's high school counselor, Don Clifton, emphasizes the importance of keeping abreast of such opportunities. His careful monitoring of changes in the Community Service Act, for example, helped to stimulate the high school's new for-credit tutoring program. Clifton attends an array of briefing sessions and workshops and sifts through the technical language of new legislation, prospecting for opportunities. Right now he's keeping tabs on changes in the Workforce Education Act, with an eye to the possibility for a student-operated career decisionmaking service.

Other tips from the field? Clifton notes that it's critical to have a clear picture of the school and community's needs; otherwise, he says, you can waste a lot of energy on peripheral projects. Both Michael Barrandey and Eric Romero, a researcher who works with the Mora schools, stress the importance of a careful planning process, and of involving all those likely to be affected by change as early as possible in that process.

Finally, Romero points out the importance of taking an "asset-based perspective" regarding each community's needs and resources. Don't just look at problems, he urges, and don't value only those resources and knowledge that are institutionalized. Mora, for example, has a four hundred-year history and indigenous knowledge systems; these "are not a limitation but a source of sustenance and development."

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Finally, policy changes are sometimes needed to allow after-hours access to school facilities and equipment. School-community collaboratives often need to meet during evening hours, for example. Several SEDL-sponsored sites have run into problems in using the school building as a meeting place. In every case, however, the group has been able to work with the school board to adapt existing policies. In one site this involved the school board's agreeing to pay extra wages to a janitorial/security staff member who opened the building for meetings, stayed till business was concluded, and then locked up for the night.

Some entrepreneurial and service learning projects rely on the use of school equipment; a student-operated Internet tutoring program, for example, uses the school's computer lab as its classroom. Special arrangements may be needed to assure after-hours access to—and appropriate supervision of—computer labs, copying equipment, vocational education facilities and equipment, or other school resources.

Addressing legal considerations. Some community-based learning activities may require special legal procedures, for example, to assure liability coverage for off-campus activities. Depending on student ages and state regulations, student work permits may be required for entrepreneurial activities. Be sure to do your homework regarding work-related rules and regulations; several states, for example, forbid monetary wages for children below a certain age. Some communities have dealt with this limitation in their entrepreneurial programs by substituting tokens or certificates that students can redeem for food, merchandise, or other privileges.

Conclusion

As one of the authors of *Benefits²* was searching for a useful way to conclude this article, she decided to ponder the problem while walking to her mailbox. In the mail she found the latest publication from her local rural electric cooperative, with a cover boasting about "a rural school that works." That cover article described an elementary school in the south Texas Valley, a school that in five years has moved from the bottom to the top rung of the state's achievement ladder (Rips, 1999). With students from one of the poorest areas in the country, and an old school building situated in the middle of a grain field, teachers, parents, and administrators have—against all odds—found a way to make change happen. If they can do it, you can do it. It's not easy—but it *is* that simple.

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